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ABSTRACT

A composition researcher collected stories from students with writing anxiety, using qualitative research tools of interview and interpretation. In literary theory it is not unusual to speak of anxiety of influence when referring to the torment of proving one is equal to a revered author. The critic Harold Bloom presented it as his theory of the anxiety of influence, the title of his 1973 book that became the first of four to explore rivalry among successive generations of authors. Teachers should de-sanctify texts by encouraging discussion of the assumptions that underlie them and the reception of readers and critics over time. The writing workshop can encourage participants to listen for craft in the work under discussion and to feel empathy for the student author. Open-ended, conversational interviews with two students illustrate how anxiety about writing takes different forms with different people. Writing from the anxious pens of "Donna" and "Lewis" finds fresh insight through strongly felt emotion, either compassion or anger. (NKA)

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by Carol Kountz

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CS 217 344

The Anxiety of Influence and the Influence of Anxiety

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Hollywood actor Jack Nicholson received an unusual award for his performance in the film, *As Good As It Gets*. He plays an anxious writer—a novelist. He was given the first Realistic Enactment of Anxiety and Living Award by the Anxiety Disorders Association of America.

As this award indicates, there are many real people who live and write with anxiety. As a composition researcher, I collect stories from students with writing anxiety using qualitative research tools of interview and interpretation. This fascinating data yields fresh insight into anxiety as it relates to writing and especially into the question of originality. In fact, it suggests to me that it is posible to adapt Harold Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence for use with writing students. Students should acknowledge anger and empathy to break free from anxiety that silences their writing.

A special writing dilemma: Anxiety of influence

In literary theory it is not unusual to speak of anxiety of influence when referring to the torment of proving one is equal to a revered author. This type of literary battle impressed the critic Harold Bloom as a law of creativity. He presented it as his theory of the anxiety of influence, the title of his 1973 book that became the first of four to explore rivalry among successive generations of authors. Freud's model of the Oedipal father-son struggle fuels this theory. The novice writer must repress earlier classics by rewriting them in a unique voice, as the twentieth-century poet Wallace Stevens reinterpreted Walt Whitman's nineteenth-century romantic poetry.

How does this theory relate to students' writing? The beginning writer must fight the predecessor in such a contest or else become silenced by the power of the author's word. This overweening desire distinguishes the successful novice from the rest. In fact, according to Bloom, literary tradition is little more than a proving ground, one that is "now valuable precisely because it partly blocks, because it stifles the weak, because it represses even the strong" ("Dialectics" 1184). The novice and the professional struggle in a duel only one can win, but only the novice is aware of it.

Relevance to teaching of writing

The heroic model that Bloom outlines does push some students into a frustrating contest with their heroes. Literature survey courses and anthologies often reinforce the model and conflate a written work with its author. Books read as a child, too, can mesmerize some people even when they are adults. People can feel an inability to write as the result of these types of influences.

As teachers, we can confront this anxiety of influence and alleviate it. We should de-sanctify a text by encouraging discussion of the assumptions that underlie it and the reception of readers and critics over time. Gerald Graff and James Phelan illustrate this approach in their edition of *Huckleberry Finn*, particularly in a fine introduction that explains the value of "teaching the controversies." This approach encourages students to see a text from a different perspective and view a canonical author with less reverent eyes.

When it comes to students' own writing, however, we cannot analyze it as we would a recognized text. The student author is highly exposed. When a student receives written or spoken responses in a writing workshop, the threat the student feels is in proportion to her or his aspirations: The greater the aspiration, the more intense the reaction. However much bravado that student outwardly displays, the exposure creates anxiety for the student.

Even if teachers anticipate students' distress, we still may not be able to defuse it with a few encouraging words. A student's comments may suggest that semi-conscious competition is underway with an author--Raymond Carver, say, or Ernest Hemingway. The teacher may want to show the ambitious student that this rivalry is frustrating attempts to write, but the teacher cannot reduce the frustration by saying, "It is impossible for you to have Hemingway's power or to get Hemingway's approval of your writing." We're dealing not with logical wishes but with semi-conscious desires the student has cultivated for years. Students may entirely reject teachers' praise of their writing. The teacher cannot give the student approval that would equal Hemingway's, since the student formed that wish long ago in an earlier stage of development.

Still, teachers should intervene in this heroic scenario. We should use relational models to counteract the agonistic pattern. Cultural institutions including nonviolent protests, feminism with its circular life course, collaboration, teamwork, and negotiated problem solving all promote the skills of listening and hearing what is being said and the ability to feel empathy for another. The writing workshop can encourage participants to listen for craft in the work under discussion and to feel empathy for the student author. The student may learn to extend that compassion to his or her own ambition and endeavor.

* * *

Now I want to discuss two Boston-area students who volunteered to discuss their anxiety about writing with me in open-ended, conversational interviews.

I spoke with Lewis at my graduate-student office. When Lewis writes short stories, he fears imitation; he does not want to "ape all the other stories I've read." As Lewis says, "It has to be my voice." He shows me a short story that he presented to a fiction writing workshop as a draft for peer comments and later revised, incorporating some suggestions. I read both versions of his story as well as the notes he was given by the instructor and classmates.

Lewis interpreted the instructor's comments as a matter of taste, not judgment, and therefore "absurd." However, Lewis agreed to make some changes that the instructor recommended in the story's structure and in its sequence of events. But he did so only because changes of that kind were minor while "the core of it [the story] is still real." Lewis disagreed with a marginal comment from the instructor that a line was wordy; he interpreted that comment as "a way of saying, I don't like the story and I'm going to have to find some stuff" to criticize. After the instructor read the revision, his end comment praised the improvement in it, but that made no difference to Lewis; he said that the comment refers "to things I don't think are problems; it doesn't matter to me, that he thinks it's structurally improved." He added, "He doesn't mean that; it's a way to say, I still don't like it." He feels the instructor is "disconnected" from the story.

Peers gave various comments. I felt their comments showed respect for the story, together with an outwardly imposed need to make some criticism. Lewis, however, told me that any suggestion that the story was not perfect was wounding and deflating to him. His story, he stressed, lacked artifice, but the workshop suggestions might impose that upon it.

The overall tenor of Lewis's remarks is resigned disappointment blended with partially concealed resentment. He analyzes the instructor and the students in order to explain their various responses to the story. A lack in each of them causes their insensitive reading. Lewis never loses faith in the story; rather, he maintains his viewpoint as the accurate evaluation. The alterations that he made at others' suggestions are passable because they are trivial. Lewis's unwillingness to consider any defects in his story, which is not unusual for a student, suggests that these flaws would threaten his identity. The integrity of his identity in this moment hinges on the idealized view of the story that the writer holds, and the heightened perception or elevated mood that he felt while composing results in idealization of it.

What does this reaction tell teachers? The teacher always has a broad "menu" of comments to offer. A student's silence or lack of cooperation could be a symptom of a teacher-comment gone amiss. Recall that Lewis believed that his instructor "didn't like" the story. If the instructor had responded differently to the draft, had identified the elusive, poetic quality that Lewis sees in the story, and then only as an afterthought raised some questions, empathy might have been communicated. Lewis might then have trusted the instructor's judgment and praise, not shrugged it off. This indifference may mean that Lewis cannot knuckle under to the instructor's authority, which stands for tradition, but must remain in the contest. Some students play out the Oedipal struggle with every piece of writing they offer. In education, the novice is assumed to be inadequate, and every paper is assumed to be a candidate for improvement, but those committed to writing must believe in the superiority of their work. For this group to endure a revision session, either in a workshop or in conference with a teacher, may be alienating.

Donna, another student who volunteered to be interviewed, talked with me in a coffee shop. Donna shows a relational writing behavior pattern, rather than an heroic mode. When a psychology class gave Donna a chance to write an essay, she chose an early woman writer whose books had been a staple of her childhood reading—"she was my first image of a female writer," Donna told me. Anxious about writing the paper and afraid she might "go blank," Donna researched the author's life and historical period exhaustively. She responded sensitively to the repressive customs in family life and social customs at that time and eventually identified strongly with her subject's creative aspirations. Feminist developmental theories suggest that women can find attachment to be a position of strength, not weakness (Gilligan 17). The empathy that Donna felt for her subject she unconsciously extended to herself, and it overcame her initial dread. In this case, then, the author's influence failed to block Donna's composing process by making her worry about originality or artifice. Rather, Donna's dedication to her subject allowed her to internalize the earlier writer's creative force and even to write in the sense of a tribute.

Donna in her essay complied with academic expectations, unlike Lewis, who decided not to acquiesce to the writing workshop. Donna's case illustrates the assimilation that exists in higher education, where students must learn to virtually reproduce existing forms and styles. The educational establishment by and large, however, holds a prejudice for the type of writing that reaches and influences readers. Writing that speaks the customer's language. The writer who refuses to comply by modifying a story consequently appears "grandiose." Ultimately, however, who is to say that the student is not right—quality is, after all, contingent upon social and cultural trend winds. Lewis's teacher cannot know the story's value. The anger a Lewis may display, concealed from us teachers, in most cases, has to do with the conflict that accompanies a motivation to make art.

The knowledge that qualitative research produces is sometimes called merely anecdotal. One isolated incident, in that critical view, cannot prove a course of treatment for an entire group. But the beginnings of a different theory of originality appear in a close study of these students, I would contend. Each of two existing theories that I have reviewed here has been conservative: influence prevents true originality; connectedness gives birth to the past. Yet writing from the anxious pens of Donna and Lewis finds fresh insight through strongly felt emotion—either compassion or anger.

Qualitative research is meaningful. Shirley Brice Heath tells how she chopped wood, cooked and sewed with people from whom she gathered the narratives for *Ways With Words* (8). The tools that will let us understand others' stories about writing are ourselves, our stories about the ways that we perform our own writing. My experience of trying to write novels gives me a basis for understanding Lewis's account. My identification with women authors, like Donna's, shows me how empathy can reduce panic. I realize that this method works by transmitting stories. My own adds a third view. A further reading

strategy would be to read interviews against the grain, as narratives, to discover any inherent contradictions.

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